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CIA's Blind Eye to the Pope Pl

By Claire Sterling

The order of arrest for Mehmet Ali Agca signed last night by Attorney General Achille Gallucci accuses the Turkish terrorist of "an attempt on the life of a head of state . . . in concourse with other persons who remain unknown." This last "is not just a precaution; it is more than that," he said.

(Judge) Luciano Infelisi, the examining magistrate who signed the warrant, said more explicitly: "For us, there is documentary proof that Mehmet Ali Agca did not act alone."

—La Stampa of Turin, May 15, 1981 (datelined Rome)

Police are convinced, according to government sources, that Mr. Agca acted alone.

—the New York Times, May 15, 1981 (datelined Rome)

He did not act alone. We know that now, since he has said so himself and the Italian judiciary has confirmed it. If not for Agca's testimony, no amount of fragmentary evidence would have convinced the world that the Bulgarian secret service, acting on behalf of the Soviet Union's KGB, conspired to murder the head of the Roman Catholic Church. Much of the world still refuses to believe it: because it seems unbelievable, and because the Western public, deliberately deceived by its own leaders, was led to conclude that there never was a conspiracy at all.

It took less than 48 hours to mount the deception. Pope John Paul II was shot and very nearly killed in St. Peter's Square on the afternoon of May 13, 1981. The first official falsehood showed up on the morning of May 15, in the New York Times, as cited above, and elsewhere in the international press.

Distorted Image

Alive and in prison, Mehmet Ali Agca was a time bomb, ticking away until the inevitable day when he would be induced to talk. So began a singular Western effort to discredit what Agca might say before he said it, suppress the supporting evidence, dismiss him as an incorrigible liar of unbalanced mind. Why the governments of free nations should have gone to such lengths to shield the Soviet Union is a long story, told only in part here, of ingenuous expectations and self-inflicted defeats. *How* they did it is easier for me to explain than why.

When the first arrests were made on the strength of his confession, in late November 1982, his image was so effectively distorted that hardly anybody was prepared to believe him. Those who might have been willing to listen were discouraged by semiofficial leaks to the press. A spokesman for Whitehall in London warned against crediting "convicts who sing to get out of jail." German and Israeli secret services were quoted in the New York Times as blaming the arrests on "doubtful information or downright disinformation." The CIA's deputy director in Rome was quoted in the Italian press as telling the interior minister bluntly: "You have no proof"—this last while rumors were spreading through Europe that Agca had been told what to say, secretly, in his prison cell, by the CIA itself.

The world was left with a somewhat confusing yet somehow comforting image of the pope's would-be assassin that would never quite fade. He was a Turk: that was something people would always remember. It made him truly a stranger in Western eyes, coming from an alien and indistinct Islamic land, stirring hazy visions of fierce mustachioed Ottomans, starving Armenians, and Ambleresque Byzantine intrigue.

Personally and politically, Agca was held to be everything and its opposite. Planetwide headlines had made him out to be at once an unregenerate neo-Nazi and a Moslem fanatic consumed with hatred for the Christian West; a cold professional killer already convicted of murder at home, and an irrational crackpot; a member of Turkey's right-wing Gray Wolves, who presumably travel in packs, and a loner—above all, a loner.

That suited a great many people at topmost international levels who feared—indeed assumed—that the truth, if uncovered, would prove to be awkward, untimely, impolitic, inexpedient, and thus unacceptable.

Much the same reasoning had contributed greatly to the global expansion of international terrorism over the previous decade. The argument went that detente must not be endangered by exposing the Russians' peccadilloes, that scolding them in public would merely bring out the worst in them—in effect that the KGB would go away if we would only be nice to it.

The results could be measured year by year in the rising levels of terrorist equipment and proficiency, assured by the Russians directly or through their surrogates. By 1981, practically all Western governments had a lengthy record of denying in public what they knew in private to be the provenance of these terrorists' training and weapons. Bigger and bolder terrorist strikes, which they might be said to have brought upon themselves, did not deter them from this course. Judging by experience, the pope's assailants might logically count on their continuing indulgence.

The operation was evidently planned to simulate the kind of mindless terrorist hit that has gradually been accorded a kind of numbed acceptance, a hit designed not so much to eliminate the victim as to frighten the audience. In this instance, however, the purpose was not to frighten the audience but to eliminate the victim. It was no terrorist hit at all. The setting was an elaborate ruse. The assassin had been hired, and paid. He had no passionate ideological commitments, nor did his employers, who were simply agents of a foreign state. Would Western governments—whatever their past performance—help to keep a secret of such magnitude?

They would, and did.

Faced with a crime of the highest international order, against the supreme leader of the largest organized church on earth, a crime committed on Vatican soil by a Turkish citizen whose trail crossed at least seven national frontiers, the Italians were essentially left to deal with it alone. Neither the six other countries implicated directly nor any of Italy's natural allies made an urgent point of gathering relevant information, still less of passing it on to Rome. The papal shooting was "not a matter of intense scrutiny" for the CIA, said one of its senior officials in Washington. "It is an Italian matter, and it would be inappropriate for us to intrude."

Vital leads were frequently ignored, knowledge infrequently shared, indispensable evidence withheld. An establishmentarian longing to keep the lid on was apparent wherever I went. "Come, now. Whatever makes you believe there was any such thing as an international plot? Our police in Germany really don't see the attack on the pope as the big operation you seem to think it was," I was told with a tolerant smile by a ranking functionary of West Germany's Bundeskriminalamt.

Agca "did not come from nowhere," the Court of Assizes in Rome declared: "Hidden minds" had sent him. He was no "delirious ideologue," felt "no personal hostility" toward the pope, and "not a word of the proceedings" had shown him to be a religious crank. Far from being crazy, he had "*uncommon gifts of mental equilibrium.*" His "spirit of discipline, professional commitment, and skill in the use of lethal weapons" had made him an ideal instrument for the operation in St. Peter's Square—just that, and no more. In the court's opinion, Agca had "merely been used as a pawn."

Yet the cult of disbelief died hard, sustained by the one source that should by rights have been above suspicion. If anybody ought to be seizing triumphantly on the Russo-Bulgarian conspiracy theory, it was the redoubtable CIA. Precisely because it had come to be seen so widely as the world's primeval anti-communist force (and prime evildoer besides), its excep-

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